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REVIEW OF THE WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION

Critical social situation in Africa

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 1989/46, the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report providing an in-depth evaluation of the critical social situation in Africa, including the impact of structural adjustment policies on the social situation in Africa, for submission to the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-second session.

2. The main features of the critical social situation in Africa were described and analysed by the secretariat of the Economic Commission for Africa and presented in the report of the Secretary-General on the major issues and programme activities of the Secretariat and the regional commissions relating to social development and welfare and specific social groups (E/CN.5/1991/3/Add.1). The present report provides additional information on that subject in the context of global socio-economic developments during the period 1989-1990.

CURRENT TRENDS AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

3. Some important initiatives were launched in the period 1989-1990, both by Governments and organizations within the region and by the international community. In many African countries, programmes of structural adjustment were initiated or continued. While the purpose of these economic programmes was to create conditions for more rapid and stable growth in the future, the immediate effects were often negative, leading to increased hardship and social dislocation. Several countries succeeded, at least partly, in restoring their external balance of trade and in meeting their obligations to service their debt, as reflected in their reduced imports and increased exports. While this indicates some success in adjusting, it may conceal the fact that fewer resources were made available for internal use to support living standards and public services.

4. Recent estimates of economic growth suggest that the performance in 1989 and 1990 may have been more favourable: the average annual growth rate was estimated at 3 per cent (see E/1990/INF/10). This gives cause for optimism when viewed against the performance of the 1980s as a whole. It is important to remember, however, that the last decade was a particularly depressed period; economic performance was often negative. It should also be kept in mind that population growth continued to outpace economic growth. The overall result for Africa during the 1980s was that living standards continued to decline.

5. Declining living standards and the effects of adjustment programmes in many countries certainly had a severe effect on the poor. The impact was not limited to them, however: broad segments of the population felt the effects of rising prices and declining services, which sometimes provoked vocal or even violent reactions, especially among urban communities and the young. In response, and with the support of the international community, many Governments introduced programmes designed to cushion the impact of adjustment measures on certain population groups. Important as these measures may have been, they were often overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of a decade of economic stagnation or decline. This resulted not only in reduced current income, consumption and services, but also in progressively deteriorating economic and social infrastructure and increasing social problems. Among the social consequences of the "lost decade" are the forced migration of people in

search of food or work, the abandonment of women and children, and an increased number of adults and children who have been reduced to living in the streets. Increases in crime and insecurity, losses in health and productivity, and missed opportunities for education and training are some of the legacies that will not be cast off easily, even when economic conditions begin to improve. On the positive side, however, the vitality of the informal sector can be observed, often as part of a more favourable attitude to both private enterprise and self-help measures, together with increasing recognition that development requires popular understanding and participation.

6. Food supplies for millions of people in Africa remain precarious. Although many Governments have sought to redirect agricultural policies to encourage greater production, Africa has witnessed a decade in which production was outstripped by population growth, or undermined by natural disasters, and dependence on imported supplies has increased. Recurring or prolonged drought has been a major factor behind the gloomy production figures. There has been no easy solution to the problem of drought; long-term measures requiring large outlays, as well as radical changes in farming and grazing techniques, are only a beginning. The result has been a food deficit, which may only be worsened by constraints on foreign exchange, which in turn hinder countries from importing sufficient foodstuffs and which are not sufficiently compensated for by the food provided under various forms of international assistance.

7. Civil strife in Africa has been another highly adverse factor, not only for food security, but for overall national development. Although several major conflicts that appeared beyond solution have been resolved in recent years, in part owing to a more favourable external climate, other conflicts remain unresolved and new ones continue to erupt. Nevertheless, there has been an increasing determination to achieve development with social justice, as witnessed by the many efforts to implement social and political reform and to create new institutions that may provide better conditions for the resolution of social conflicts and for the initiation of broad-based programmes of development.

8. The role of government in the promotion of agriculture and food production is changing. The small farmer is receiving greater attention, and the importance of price as an incentive to production is being emphasized more than before. While higher or freer prices may elicit increased output, this is only part of a long-term approach that requires many other complementary measures. There is already recognition of the role of women as producers. What is needed are more specific measures to give women access to resources and to develop their skills. Moreover, it should be recognized that by allowing higher prices to be paid to producers, Governments may endanger secure access of the urban and rural poor to food supplies, so that compensatory measures may be required.

9. Perhaps one of the more serious long-term legacies of the economic conditions prevalent in the 1980s is the negative impact on the development of educational opportunities and the quality of education. Increased expenditure on education and school enrolment continued into the early or mid-1980s, but since then there has been evidence of a reversal of this trend. The implications this has for the already insufficient educational opportunities for girls are particularly troubling.

10. Public spending on the provision of health and welfare services has long been comparatively small, rarely accounting for more than 1 per cent of gross domestic product in most countries. While some notable successes have been achieved through low-cost, primary health-care measures, these sectors have continued to be especially starved for resources.

11. Africa's economies, which are predominantly small and dependent on external trade, and therefore in need of external capital, are particularly vulnerable to unfavourable developments in the global economy. African countries were buffeted by the sharp fluctuations of the global economy in the early 1980s and they continued to suffer from various unresolved problems, even while the global economy itself was on an upward path. They have been adversely affected by high interest rates, volatile exchange rates and weak commodity prices. Slow growth in the provision of concessionary capital has particularly affected African countries, as they are especially reliant on it for investment.

12. A number of measures have been taken recently by the international community, including partial debt relief and the provision of additional resources through official assistance programmes, for example, in the context of structural adjustment support measures. These, however, have rarely met the need for resources. While the net transfer of resources to sub-Saharan Africa increased in 1988 and 1989 over previous years, reaching an estimated $US 6 billion, this figure represents a substantial decline compared with the amount made available in the early 1980s (see A/45/487, table 3).

13. It is not yet clear what impact the recent slowing and predicted downturn in the world economy will have on Africa as a whole or on each individual economy and society, but it is not likely to be a generally favourable one. The picture is complicated by recent global and regional political developments. These will affect interest rates, capital availability, prices for oil and other vital commodities, remittances, and migration patterns.

14. At its forty-sixth session, the General Assembly will review and appraise actions undertaken by the African countries and by their development partners under the United Nations Programme of Action for African Recovery and Development 1986-1990, and it will consider proposals for future co-operation between African countries and the international community.